

News Release



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Have FUN, but think SAFETY

State Park Lifeguards Prepare For Summer Crowds, Urge Safety First

California State Parks is once again gearing up one of the nation's largest lifeguard forces and, for the second year in a row, that force is sending a safety alert message to the public. Again this year, the number of summer season lifeguards stationed throughout State Parks beaches, lakes and reservoirs will be less than full strength, but about the same number as last year, a result of the continuing budget crisis for the State of California.

"Our intention here is to alert the public and ask for their help in making this a safe summer at our beaches," said State Parks Deputy Director for Operations Bill Berry.

In past years, State Parks has hired around 600 seasonal lifeguards. In 2001, State Parks hired 628. Last year, as the economic downturn worsened and budget cuts were made, 556 seasonal lifeguards were hired statewide, a reduction of 72. This year, the summer of 2003, the number hired should be the same as last year, with no further reductions anticipated if the current budget proposed takes affect in July 2003.

Because of the reduction in lifeguards, State Parks will again be reducing off-season lifeguard staffing, shortening the operating hours and/or closing some lifeguard towers,

eliminating second lifeguards in vehicle patrols, designating specific swim areas, and reducing park and beach hours at some locations.

“We are working hard to hold the line at last year’s level of staffing and not go any lower,” said Berry. “It should be noted that we are not reducing just the lifeguards; the depth of the budget reductions has required reductions throughout the entire park system. We have deliberately made most of those cuts in middle and upper management, not at the park level, in order to do everything possible to impact our visitors the least. “

Confronted with what has been described as the worst economic downturn since World War II, all state government departments and agencies are dealing with significant budget cuts for the second year in a row. At the same time, there has been an increase in park attendance and State Parks Lifeguards are scrambling to shore up defenses at beaches, lakes, and reservoirs and inform visitors of actions they can take to ensure a safe summer.

“Our lifeguards are preparing for what could be a difficult summer with record beach crowds” said Richard DeBoer, president of the California State Lifeguard Association (CSLA), the professional organization that represents more than 500 state park lifeguards. “It’s no secret that the state’s economy, world events, and recreation trends are fueling the continued explosion of increased visitation to our state parks,” DeBoer said. “There isn’t much we can do about the state’s economy and decreasing budgets, but there is a lot we can do, and our visitors can do, to make this a safe summer. “

Visitor statistics released by the California Department of Parks and Recreation show that about 85 million visitors were drawn to California’s 273 state parks in 2002. That is a 48% increase in visitors over the past five years.

Rescue statistics compiled by the Department show that State park lifeguards performed 6,969 rescues in 2002. During this period, there were 22 drownings; however, records show that none of the drownings occurred in guarded areas.

“Clearly, keeping people in guarded areas works,” said Mike Brousard, Huntington State Beach lifeguard chief. “With summer approaching, our first priority will be to continue to

educate the public about water safety, then to direct park visitors to areas where lifeguard service will be provided.”

“Sadly, drowning continues to be the leading cause of accidental death in our state parks,” said DeBoer. “What makes these drowning accidents so tragic is that they are one-hundred percent preventable. ZERO is the only acceptable drowning statistic in our profession. The key to reversing the trend is a combination of prevention based programs including public education and adequate staffing levels,” he added.

Key Public Safety Message for a Safe Summer

Park officials are encouraging the public to pay close attention to safety signs as they enter the park or access beaches, to swim directly in front of staffed lifeguard towers, and to contact their local state park lifeguard service to learn where the safest areas to swim will be this summer.

The message to the public is be alert and follow the advice and safety tips of the lifeguards on duty. Lifeguards offer the following:

Top 10 Water Safety Tips:

1. Learn to Swim. It's Fun!
2. Swim Near a Lifeguard. Stay in the guarded section of the beach.
3. Check Water Conditions Before Entering.
4. Never Swim Alone.
5. Float With a Current.
6. Don't Dive Headfirst.
7. Never Swim after Consuming Alcohol / Drugs.
8. Wear a Hat and Sunscreen.
9. When Boating, Always Wear a Personal Flotation Device.
10. Encourage Children to Join a Junior Lifeguard Program.

At the most fundamental level, it is the lifeguard's mission to prevent drowning accidents. Every year American lifeguards perform more than 70,000 open water rescues, according to statistics collected by the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA). Despite these efforts, drowning continues to be the third leading cause of death in the U.S., claiming over 4,000 lives each year. USLA estimates the chance of drowning at an American beach protected by lifeguards is less than one in 18 million.

According to Brouard, several factors are contributing to increased beach attendance including a reduction in park use fees, warm weather, a growing state population, and a downturn in the economy that keeps Californians enjoying more affordable recreational activities closer to home. Brouard added, "With a serious budget shortfall, every state agency, including state parks, will be implementing cost saving measures. We will be using every appropriate strategy to ensure that our visitors are as safe as possible while we shoulder our portion of the state's financial burden. The public should know that there may be some noticeable service reductions. However, if they follow our advice, our rescue statistics for guarded areas prove that they can have a safe summer."

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